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A MILITARY STRATEGY FOR THE PERSIAN GULF

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Devising a military strategy is an intellectual exercise. As much art as science, it is the stuff of soldier scholars. Strategic thinking requires the ability to blend abstract concepts with concrete realities. Military strategy at the higher levels is more than merely a plan which links ends with means. It must be consistent with and serve our national, or grand strategy. It must bridge Clausewitz's distinction between things, "... that are merely preparation for war, and war proper."

It would seem that strategic thought and planning in the abstract would be an anathema to the stereotypical "man of action" military leader. While it appears that great strategic thinkers are born, not made, it also appears possible to learn strategic patterns of thought based on principles derived from historical examples.

The Art Grant framework is a vehicle for analyzing and developing military strategy. In its simplest form, it consists of factors which lead the strategist through the classic elements of strategy---a plan linking ends and means. There is a real danger of oversimplification here; it's not as easy as it seems. The steps in the framework are questions---not answers. The questions are difficult, often there's not enough data; inspiration, judgment and assumptions are necessary. Faulty judgment, impaired logic, or bad assumptions will lead to disaster. This is where art and inspiration leave science behind, and lead one to the conclusion that a military strategy is never complete. Since military strategy achieves life in the form of a plan, it is subject to a host of

constantly changing variables. Therefore, it must be seen as a continuing process rather than as a task to be finished.

With all of that in mind, we will devise a military strategy for the Persian Gulf. We will use the Grant framework as a start point for inspiration rather than as structure which confines our thoughts.

As we know, a military strategy must begin with and serve to promote a political objective. Political objectives are derived from broadly stated precepts seen as the pillars of American society and grouped together as national interests. National interests seem to come in all shapes and colors, and reside mainly in the eye of the beholder. Certain of these interests, however, are the embodiment of the concept of "America" and are shared by most of us. These are so-called vital national interests---ones which we would go to war to defend. Among them are physical security, our standard of living, our ideology, our power base and our national prestige.

For the last forty years, our primary concern in the Persian Gulf centered around the policy of containment. The potential for Soviet expansion to the south was made more likely by Britain's gradual departure from the area following World War II. The Soviets attempted to carve out a sphere of influence in Iran and Turkey, contemplating a warm water port on the Persian gulf. This led Iran and Turkey to petition the United States for assistance and President Truman to assume responsibilities in a region of the world previously under British influence.

The 1947 Truman Doctrine was the first in a series of "Doctrines" developed by a succession of U.S. presidents to articulate U.S. policy in the Middle East. Generally, the countries of the region applauded the British withdrawal. But, Turkey and Iran, located on the doorstep of the Soviet Union, turned to the United States to balance the Russian threat. The United States learned the fundamentals of containment and the balance power even as the theory of containment was being articulated.

During the early years of the Cold War, Persian Gulf oil resources were supplying 75% of all European requirements and were recognized as crucial to European recovery. The Gulf and its oil were also seen as crucial to any future war, second only to Europe in importance to the United States. The word "vital" was used to describe Middle East oil.

As the British completed their withdrawal, the Eisenhower Doctrine served notice that the United States would defend the Middle East against a Soviet threat. The Soviets, in turn, established close ties with Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, circumventing the Eisenhower Doctrine. In part, this was made possible by the relationship between the United States and Israel.

Next came the Nixon Doctrine and the "twin-pillar" policy. The United States was involved in Viet Nam and world wide commitments precluded dedicating forces to the Persian Gulf. Instead, the Nixon Doctrine relied on the Gulf states to assume responsibility for their own defense. Iran and Saudi Arabia became the twin-pillars of

U.S. policy in the region. The revolution and hostage crisis in Iran, unrest in Turkey and Pakistan and the invasion of Afghanistan made it clear that the Nixon Doctrine had failed.

President Carter recognized the United States' vital interest in the Gulf and assumed responsibility for its defense in the Carter Doctrine. The Rapid Deployment Force became CENTCOM with the mission of defeating a Soviet attack on Iran.

The Carter Doctrine was generally followed by the Reagan administration, but with the corollary that Saudi Arabia would not become another Iran. There is little doubt that American security policy in the Gulf was valid. Deterrence worked, but because of a lack of shared vision with the Gulf States, regional stability has yet to be achieved.

In the late 1960s, the British withdrawal east of Suez left several small, weak Gulf states and marked a change in U.S. policy. Under the Nixon doctrine, the U.S. would take over where the British had left, but would work through surrogates---the twin-pillars. Iran and Saudi Arabia would get military assistance and act as buffers to the Soviets. As the 60s became the 70s, containment of Russia was our prime interest in the region. Access to oil and protection of Israeli sovereignty were also listed as U.S. interests.

As the 70s ended, access to reasonably priced oil replaced containment as the number one U.S. interest. The oil embargo and rapid price rise of the 70s forced U.S. policy makers to face

certain facts. While the Carter Doctrine was still concerned about containment, it recognized oil as a vital U.S. interest which we would protect with force. In contrast to Nixon, the Carter Doctrine accepts responsibility for stability in the region, threatens the use of force to protect the oil and refuses to work through surrogates. The implication was that the U.S. would protect friendly regimes from going the way of Iran.

There was recognition of the fact that the Nixon Doctrine had created Iranian hegemony in the Gulf. Also, there came the growing realization that Gulf issues could not be separated from the Arab Israeli conflict. And, that in the Arab world, everything is connected. We also gradually came to grips with the fact that the Gulf States did not perceive the Soviets as a threat. Rather, they placed emphasis on the local threat. We seemed to shift back toward the Nixon Doctrine, supporting regimes willing to stand on their own two feet and willing to promote stability in the region.

As we begin the 90s, we have defined our interests in the Gulf as follows: continued access to reasonably priced oil; maintenance of regional stability in order to prevent disruptions in the oil supply; insurance of Israel's survival within the 67 borders. Certain facts are inescapable. The Soviet military threat in the area is greatly reduced. Additionally, a weakened Soviet Union will be unable to support allies in the Gulf and will not play a strong role. The Persian Gulf has 70% of the world's oil reserves. The U.S. imports 46% of its oil. The need for imported oil is projected

to rise. In addition, it is relatively easy to construct a vision of the future wherein the U.S. is in competition with the other world economic powers for dwindling oil supplies. A continuing supply of reasonably priced oil is necessary to maintain economic power. Economic power is an indispensable part of military power. Thus, because of its potential effect on our vital national interests of maintaining economic well-being, our standard of living and physical security, assuring continued access to reasonably priced Persian Gulf oil becomes a political objective derived directly from U.S. vital national interests.

With the definition of a political objective, the military strategist must articulate a military objective which, when achieved will insure that the political objective is attained. Defining the military objective is only slightly easier than articulating the political objective. Use of the military instrument is not by definition the use of a blunt instrument. The military instrument can be used with subtlety and finesse. It can be a tool of policy used to keep the probability of war low, or it can be used as the continuation of policy, by other means, when conflict is unavoidable.

Perhaps the best way to define a military objective is to examine the threat. An estimate of the threat should reduce uncertainty and give a picture of any future conflict. This is a critical step, because underestimating the threat leads to a false sense of security and overstating the threat leads to unnecessary

expense. While a correct estimate of the threat will not guarantee a sound strategy, an incorrect threat estimate will almost surely lead to a bad strategy. A careful analysis of the threat will help to establish the criteria for setting priorities. Without an accurate assessment of the threat, the strategy will be shapeless.

What is the threat to continued U.S. access to reasonably priced Persian Gulf oil? There seems to be universal agreement that the threat of a Soviet invasion of Iran is now nonexistent. Additionally, for a host of reasons, a communist takeover in any of the Gulf countries seems to be outside the realm of possibility. There are, however, a number of very real threats to the region and its oil. Each of them ultimately is a local threat to regional stability.

Social/psychological changes are occurring which will rock the Persian Gulf States to their foundations. Urbanization, population growth, better education and increased media exposure are leading to changes in basic values and the very structure of Arab society. The borders of the Gulf countries are, in general, lines drawn on the map by the British. As a result, there is weak national identity. Most in the region identify with family, religion, and tribe rather than country. There is a lack of general economic development in the area, with wide discrepancies between have and have not nations. There are generalized problems with corruption. There is the diffusion of power dilemma. This is manifested by a lack of participation in government by the middle class. Finally, the area

is beset by potentially violent fundamentalist religious movements, which threaten established governments.

More obvious patterns of potential conflict also exist. There are over 200 territorial disputes that flare up from time to time. There is the Arab/Israeli conflict. There are potential conflicts brewing over oil, as have not nations begin to question the distribution of oil wealth. Water remains a very serious problem. Considered the most valuable natural resource in the region, water is more likely than oil to be a source of conflict in the Gulf.

When we add the current arms race to all of these sources of potential conflict, one need not be particularly pessimistic to predict war in the Gulf. Several countries have intermediate range ballistic missiles capable of reaching across the region. Iraq and Iran have demonstrated the will to target each other's cities. Iraq has used chemical weapons against Iran and the Kurds. The Iran/Iraq war is in a state of cease fire, but seems to be one of those intractable conflicts between mortal enemies that the Middle East breeds.

Thus, the most likely threats are regional. The potential for medium level conflict between states is very real. The Iran/Iraq war is an example of a local conflict that spills over and affects other countries of the region and has the potential for affecting the supply of oil. In addition, there is a very real danger of internal conflict in any of the Gulf States. The Shia/Sunni split is a problem in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and several other countries as

well. The Shia see themselves as an oppressed minority. Where class and economic lines parallel religious divisions, it's just a matter of time before fighting breaks out.

All of this points to a variety of potential inter and intra state conflicts which could disrupt the flow of oil. The threat is to the stability of the region. Some see regional stability as a U.S. interest. I prefer Phoebe Marr's view, that stability is a means to an end. The best way to insure a reliable flow of oil is to maintain a calm stable political atmosphere in the Gulf. Thus, is fairly easy to state our military objective as follows: To maintain stability in the Persian Gulf.

With this objective in mind, we must examine our military capabilities and vulnerabilities in order to devise a strategic plan. As we know all too well, we now face a time of seriously limited military budgets. That means that the strategic plan is even more important, since only minimum forces will be available.

Our recent experience with the Kuwaiti reflagging and escort mission gives significant insight that can be useful now. It will be virtually impossible to station land forces in the area. None of the Gulf States would be willing to sacrifice its position in the Arab world by welcoming U.S. troops. This situation will persist as long as the Arab/Israeli conflict continues. However, most Gulf States welcome a low key U.S. naval presence. The reflagging mission yielded a wealth of military to military contacts and good will. This beginning should be nurtured, and the entry gained in

the GCC states should be continued and expanded. A force of at least four U.S. naval vessels should be in the Persian Gulf at all times. They should exercise with countries of the region, make port visits and continue the friendships and good will that resulted from the reflagging mission.

The military is the correct instrument for this mission which sounds more diplomatic than military. The military is a respected institution in the Arab world, all Arab leaders from Muhammad to the present start as battlefield leaders.

It is extremely important that we demonstrate our commitment and that our dependability be unquestioned. This will require a long term effort. In addition to the naval force, we should preposition equipment for a small but potent ground force. This should be designed along the lines of the Rapid Deployment Force, and should exercise in the area. The exercises should begin modestly, we must work with our friends in the area---not overwhelm them.

Finally, we must state clearly that our military objective is to insure regional stability in order to facilitate a reliable flow of oil. We must not be drawn into the internal problems and conflicts of individual countries. That is not to say that we should not encourage and support our friends, but we must allow and encourage the Gulf states to determine their own destinies and to solve their own problems.

The strategic plan which evolves from all of this must be a living document, under constant review, changing when necessary. In general, our mission is to maintain a visible naval presence, backed up by a small but potent ground force stationed in the U.S. but dedicated to the region, and immediately available. The peacetime military mission is to develop, maintain and improve our military to military contacts with the Gulf States. This will be accomplished through frequent low key military training exercises, and exchange programs. These will be highlighted by aggressive training and high level military education programs for Arab officers and technicians in the U.S.

The goal here is to prevent hegemony by any one of the Gulf States. We will accept the role of regional policeman. We will prevent acts of aggression, with military force if necessary. The objective here is to fill the vacuum left by Iran with a non-threatening, non aggressive military force dedicated to maintaining security in the whole area. Eventually we would encourage the GCC states to welcome non members and to take an active part in the regional security mission.

We should examine our vulnerabilities to avoid deluding ourselves and to test our assumptions. We, as a people, are impatient, generally uncomfortable with long-term commitments. We are vulnerable to acts of terrorism and hostage taking. We must recognize that we are also prone to backing governments loyal to us, while preaching the virtues of self determination. Finally, we must

come to grips with the political question of just when and to what extent do we get involved. Will it take an actual interruption of the flow of oil, or will something less trigger U.S. military action. Answers to these questions in the form of unambiguous policy statements would make the task of the military strategist easier, but such answers will never be proffered. That means that theater campaign plans addressing a wide variety of contingencies will be necessary.

Our strategy, simply stated, is to enhance and maintain regional stability by preventing, or failing that, by containing or limiting conflicts, while allowing each nation to determine its own course of domestic politics.

The potential results of this strategy are all positive. In general, Gulf leaders understand that a U.S. presence will benefit the area, by making it a safer place. The deterrent power of superpower presence is a benefit to the entire region. The role of regional policeman is necessary, and no one else can perform that thankless task. A constructive U. S. presence which over time gains the respect and confidence of the Gulf Countries would make the local arms race unnecessary. Eventually, arms control talks could take place and give way to real cooperation on the truly important regional issues such as distribution of oil wealth, water, and the Israeli/Palestinian problem. The Persian Gulf is too important to be ignored. We must clearly state our interest in the area. Most of the oil in the world is in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq. The price

of oil will gradually rise in the 90s and access to it will become a primary concern for the industrialized world. Additionally, the Gulf Countries have been good friends to the U.S. and deserve our help and good will as they experience a doubling in population and come to grips with a host of social problems. The answer is promoting regional stability with deterrence of conflicts assured by U.S. naval presence backed up by a rapidly deployable ground force. Finally, we must aid in slowing down the acquisition of nuclear weapons in the area and we must aid in setting up crisis management institutions.